

The Citizenship Triangle

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Everyone talks about "rights" -- "oh, my rights have been violated" and "we must increase rights" and "our rights are eroding."

Maybe so, but rights are only one corner of the Citizenship Triangle. A citizen has rights only if the other two corners exist as well. The Hat of a Citizen, his job, also called "citizenship," is composed of these three items working together. Taking a page from the Citizen Hat the definitions of a "Hat" and the three corners are:

Definitions



Hat is, of course, a covering for a head, but also is "a role or office symbolized by or as if by the wearing" of a hat, says the *American Heritage Dictionary*. It is the rights, duties and responsibilities that go along with a job. A nurse's cap makes a person recognizable as a Nurse. The same is true of a soldier, sailor, bishop, railway conductor, and so on. If a person in a nurse's hat wants to take your blood pressure, you would not object because you know that is part of her job. It is her hat.

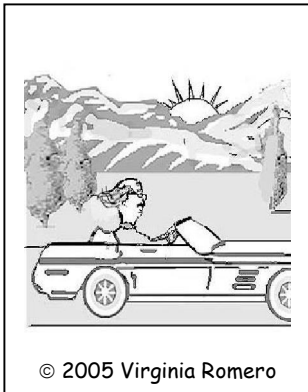
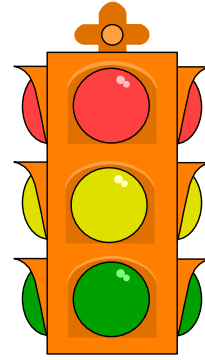
Rights and "powers" are abilities. A right is an ability of a person while a "power" is an ability of a government. A person may have a *right* to speak while a government has a *power* to tax. According to *American Heritage Dictionary*, a right is "that which is just, morally good, legal, proper, or fitting" or "something that is due to a person or governmental body by law, tradition, or nature." A person wearing a **hat** uses rights to carry out his responsibilities and duties. For instance, the hat of a nurse gives her the right to enter a sickroom when others might be barred, but only to perform the duties of a Nurse.



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The way some people talk, you would think that is all there is. But the other two corners of the triangle are equally important.

Duties are those actions that a person has agreed to do. A duty is "an obligation assumed (as by contract) or imposed by law," says *Merriam-Webster's Dictionary of Law*. It is an obligation to others. For instance, everyone expects the driver of a car to obey traffic signals. When he sits behind the wheel, he puts on the **hat** of a driver and agrees to stop at red lights. It is his duty. A Nurse may be obliged to take vital signs so doctors can treat patients more effectively. Because she has agreed with doctors and patients to perform that function, she is then allowed to wear the hat of a Nurse.



Responsibilities are those actions a person takes to forward a purpose. Many dictionaries confuse "responsibility" with duty. An action can be both a duty and a responsibility but a driver has a *duty* to stop at a stoplight, while he has the *responsibility* to take care of his car. Getting a tune-up is not a duty, but if the driver wants to drive, he'll get it done. "Taking responsibility" means recognizing that fulfilling your purpose depends on your own action. Some say it is "just the right thing to do." *The Destiny of Freedom* defines responsibility as a "willingness to embrace a purpose."

Embracing a Purpose

Citizenship has to do with embracing a purpose. Every citizen is a member of a group, whether the group is *République Française* (The Republic of France), The United States of America, your church, the local Garden Club or The Global Economy. The purpose of a Citizen is the survival of the group.

A citizen wants the group to survive. He is willing to embrace the purpose of his group's survival. He recognizes the group's survival is not assured unless he *does* something about it. Therefore, he performs the duties of a citizen which can be as simple as becoming informed on the issues affecting the survival of the group or as complex as leading the group to greener pastures. To execute these duties, he will have to exercise abilities, abilities that cannot be hampered by anyone else in the group. Unhampered abilities are called "rights."

The three corners of the triangle, rights-duties-responsibility, rise and fall together. For instance, if a citizen is not allowed to exercise his abilities, he will not be able to perform his duties. He will become less willing to embrace the purpose.

On the other hand, as a person's rights increase, he is able to perform greater duties for his group and he will become more willing to embrace the purpose. (Yeah, right. Is this the world we live in?) But wait, it gets better. Suppose a citizen performs great duties for his fellow citizens. He will be allowed more rights -- they will allow him more leeway. And as his unhampered performance increases, he becomes more willing to

embrace the purpose. (Oh, Lord, what poppycock! We are talking about earth-bound men here, not Angels in Heaven.)

Snide parenthetical remarks impugning the nobility of Man come from a long association with our species and its apparent willingness to abuse rights. But degraded nobility actually comes from an equally long misunderstanding of rights. Government handouts are a prime example.

Government Handouts

Government handouts might be necessary from time to time, but, despite those who crow otherwise, they are not rights. They are, in fact, anti-rights. Look at it. Someone hands you something. You don't have to do anything for it. Most folks would feel a little criminal and would vow to work up to no longer needing the subsidy. But suppose you are informed, "no, it is your *right*." Suddenly, the recipient is duty-bound to accept it. Rather than performing a duty that is an "obligation *to* others," he is roped into an obligation *from* others. The group is diminished and, to the credit of the noble nature of man, most of us resent it. We become less willing to "forward" the purpose of the survival of the group.

Then why would anyone insist upon rights that are not really rights? Look at it. Suppose Joe and Pete and Bill are a group. Pete wants to head it but his buddies also have their own ideas. Pete gets Bill to vote with him to take Joe's stuff and divide it equally amongst the three. Joe, his treasure stolen, is less willing to be a good citizen. Bill, feeling a bit criminal, is less willing to perform his duties. Pete remains the only "citizen" of this dysfunctional association. No matter that it is not much of a group, Pete got what he wanted -- he's the leader, isn't he?

The Value of Rights

Rights exist to (1) enable a person to perform his obligations that (2) forward the survival of the group. If a "right" does not do that, it is not a right. The better it enables you to perform your duties as a citizen, the more valuable it is.

To paraphrase a famous quote^{*}: Ask not what rights you have -- ask what you can do with them to ensure the survival of your group.

^{*} John F. Kennedy Inaugural speech, January 20, 1961 "... my fellow Americans: ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country.

"My fellow citizens of the world: ask not what America will do for you, but what together we can do for the freedom of man."